

The Mythological Thought of *Rigveda*

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Abstract

Mythological thought is a specific way of thinking in the history that human beings transit from the age of barbarism to the age of civilization. It reflects human beings' divine experience on nature and life as a method for human beings to master and transcend the nature as well as the interpretation of initial human society beyond humanism, which symbolizes the evolution of human thoughts from primitive thoughts to higher logic thoughts. The thinking mode and emotions of Indians are deeply rooted in religious views, which were even reflected in ancient Vedic period. *Rigveda* is a paean that was generated when Aryans fought against invasion by different races and the nature. Aryans on the grassland led a nomadic life in the vast world. They felt the spirits of all things due to worship of the nature so they were generous with worship of deities. After Aryans lived a stable life in the agrarian society, the mythological world of Aryans developed from polytheism to monolatry. In other words, it developed towards the world with fewer deities or the lord deity. With polytheism, their worship for deities was gradually improving simultaneously. As the origin of India religious culture, *Rigveda* has reflected various features of Indian's mythological thought.

Key words: *Rigveda*; mythological thought; polytheism; harmony

I. Structure of the Mythological World

“In the 5th Century B.C., the famous Veda commentator Yaska divided the mythological world into three divisions as Div, Antariksa and Prthivi in his *Nirukta*. In Div, there are the Div ruler or judicial deity Varu4a, the sky deity Dy6us, the sun deities of different positions including S8rya, S6vitri and Mitra, and the dawn deity U9as; in Antariksa, there are the thunder deity Indra, the thunderstorm deity Rudra and Marut, the wind deity V6yu, the rain deity Parjanya, the water deity ^pas, etc.”¹. “In Prthivi, there are the fire deity Agni, the wine deity Soma, the earth deity P2thiv7, the river deity or wisdom deity Sarasvat7.”² “Additionally, there are the horse deity Dadhikr6, the cattle deity Vi94u, Yamarak9 as in charge of ghosts, the devil deity Rak9as, the evil deity As8ra, the language deity V6c, the infinite deity Aditi, etc.”³

There are 33 deities in *Rigveda* separately belonging to three divisions. The three divisions (the three dimensions), Div, Antariksa and Prthivi, constitute the spatial structure of mythology world of Vedic ancestors that is one of the most important features as well as the premise of mythological thought.

In the Indian myth, war is a theme that runs through. War existed between Aryans and natives as well as between each Aryan tribe. From the perspective of religious meanings, the war pattern is the extreme of binary opposition. In *Rigveda*, it is differentiated that there are two sides: “the side of evil deities who are uniformly called as Asura and the side of good deities, which jointly constitute the two extremes that serve as the world origin. Ancestors in *Rigveda* believed that deities own their consciousness. There are few evil deities while there are a number of good deities, with character dominated by mercy and nobility, whose

activities directly influence the life of human beings. Deities own power that can only be used to shelter their nation. Besides, deities can actively sympathize the diseases of human beings and solve difficulties for human beings so deities are their friends. Therefore, Aryans of that period were not afraid of deities that they worshiped. The deities deep inside Veda ancestors in India are immortal. Immortality “originates either from Agni and Savitri or from drinking Soma wine”.⁴ According to appearance, they are human beings and each body part is poetically regarded as the natural phenomenon. They pass through the clouds on vehicles pulled by animals so as to enjoy the ghee, milk, cereal, meat and Soma wine offered by human beings. Thus, human beings always praise the benignity of deities: “He, the glorious deity, is our kind and merciful friend.” (RV, VIII, 93, 3) “Oh, dear deities, you are sacred, elegant and prosperous; you are dignified and honest, You bless us and wish happiness to us.” (RV, I, 1, 6), through which ancestors’ pursuit for kindness is presented. Through singing paeans for deities, human beings express their faith and respect to the nature and deities so as to please deities and pray for deities’ favor or forgiveness.

In the chapter 86 and 88 of vol.7 in *Rigveda*, which can be indicated that ancestors had realized the existence of anrita, agas, enas. “Evil emerges due to breach of Rta of the morality world (such as breach of truth and justice), Rta of the religious world (such as sacrifice and rite) or divine command. In the unalterable causality rule, a good beginning makes a good ending while a bad beginning makes a bad ending, which is the most prominent view in Indian thoughts, Karman.”⁵ Karman means “retribution”, that is, the casual retribution for behaviors, which exerts effects on both human beings and deities in *Rigveda*. According to views in *Rigveda*, the harmonious life under the will of deities with offering, praying and solemnization is the most ideal moral spiritual life. Thus, in *Rigveda*,

apart from sukta of deities, there are also demands for human beings, in which the regeneration idea of Indians is demonstrated.

In the mythological world of *Rigveda*, the three dimensions including Div, Antariksa and Prthivi, the four territories including heaven, earth, human and deities, the three time dimensions including prelife, present and afterlife, all stretches out and are connected causally. Additionally, human, animals, plants and deities are present at the same time, which is a presentation of religious worldview in Indian literature that in the kaleidoscope of time and space including eternal soul and reincarnation, with human in the reality as the subject, worlds of human, deities and animals that serve as both audience and actors are mutually connected, jointly constituting a vivid universe drama that is connected by the continuous causal chain under the rule of ultimate law.

II. Generalization and Refinement of Anthropomorphization

Anthropomorphization is not just applied to Indian mythologies, but also serves as a commonly-used method in all the mythologies around the world, through which ancestors attempted to realize the communication with deities and to explain everything in the world. In *Rigveda*, the feature of general anthropomorphization has been apparently presented as the names of rivers, and mountains and specific objects and phenomena can be anthropomorphized. Soma is the anthropomorphization of plants and drinks; Agni is the anthropomorphization of fire; Usas is the anthropomorphization of glow at dawn. Veruna and Dyaus are the anthropomorphization of deities. Differently, Dyaus is the deity in charge of daytime while Veruna is the deity in charge of the whole day. The names of these deities are completely the same as the names of natural phenomena. Though representing one deity, each phenomenon has its own name, showing the detailed classification. “The functional tendency towards specialization shall owe to deities. The cause for the tendency

is named as mythological synonyms by Hillebrandt, which is sufficiently explained in *Rigveda*. Similar to the same meanings of synonyms, words indicate the same meaning. Actually, each word has its own different meaning. Thus, deities refer to the objects or phenomena that they represent. Generally speaking, the deities superficially manage the nature or life that they represent but they are all equipped with special physical foundation, unique features and theophanic moment.”⁶

For instance, in *Rigveda*, the sun deity has alternative names, such as Surya, Savitri, Mitra, Pusan and Visnu. Though they are deities of sun, each name represents different features and functions of the sun. The sun deity is Surya, when representing a bright ball; to represent the natural force that gives light, the sun deity is Mitra; the sun deity is Savitri, regarding the promoter of life; the sun deity is Pusan, which represents the incubator and protector of cattle; the sun deity is Visnu, when the sun rises from the horizon to the sky.

Chinese mythological thought is different. In Chinese mythology, the ruler of world power is no longer pure natural object, but the combination of natural objects and deities, for example, the fire deity Zhu Rong, the water deity Gong Gong and the river deity He Bo, who are the sanctification production of heroes or ancestors by barbarians. In China, a deity of nature usually takes charge of a certain natural phenomenon rather than refers to a natural phenomenon itself. For instance, Xi He is the deity in charge of sun and moon rather than sun and moon themselves; Zhu Rong is the deity of fire rather than fire itself; Kui, a one-foot beast lives in the Haibo Mountain seven thousand Li away from the coast, takes charge of wind, rain and thunder. It can be indicated that Indian mythological thought has more abundant imagination.

Deities are mainly anthropomorphized natural phenomena. Besides preference for natural phenomena, anthropomorphized deities of animals and plants, such as white elephant,

cow, monkey, dragon-like snake, lotus, Bodhi tree and the golden-wing bird, are common in mythologies. Indian ancestors has the special psychology to express the communication with everything in the world through anthropomorphization of deities. Thus, anthropomorphization in Indian mythologies is the free integration of two factors, human and nature. Through anthropomorphization of nature, they consciously participated in nature and expressed their emotions and ideas. When “natural force is anthropomorphized, the prime deities emerge”⁷. From invasion of Aryans into India to the era of *Rigveda*, worship of nature is transformed to deities of nature after deification of natural phenomena. They believed that the activities of deities exist everywhere in the boundless universe. Alternation of seasons, emergence of wind and rain, number of reproduction, fortune and misfortune are all related to the activities and moods of deities. In the imagination of ancestors, deities were with them. They revered and were also close to deities. They prayed that various deities in the nature can intervene the life of human beings and bless them.

III. Coexistence of Monotheism and Polytheism

Tagore once said: “A person with vitality and natural fantasy wakes up at the dawn of civilization and feels the infinite mystery hidden in life. This is their simple faith, that is, owing all the power and elements in the nature to divinity.”⁸ It can be said that polytheism, pantheism and monotheism simultaneously exist in *Rigveda* “in an unstable balance”⁹. Actually, in India, monotheism and pantheism coexist similar to the future Hinduism that includes all the monism and polytheism.

Pantheon in Hinduism is the outcome of correspondence of Aryan culture to internal environment integration as well as the production of mutual integration of Aryan culture and native culture, in which there are deities of nature that are worshiped by Aryans and

deities of ancestors that are worshipped by native residents. Such polytheism phenomenon had lasted to around 1000 B.C. By the later Vedic period, polytheism gradually developed to integration, during which Indian ancestors experienced the gradual transform of thoughts.

Polytheistic religions serve as the religious basis of pantheistic philosophy, that is, the philosophy sublimed from pantheistic religious thoughts. Evidences for polytheism in *Rigveda* are recorded in the sukta, *Dedicated to All deities*.

The deity, with brown skin and mutable body shapes, is plump and young, dressed up by golden accessories (Soma)

The deity, sitting at his throne, serves as the wise among deities, glorious and gorgeous. (Agni)

The deity, holding a gold axe, serves as the industrious among deities. (Tvastar) The deity waves the shell in his hand to smash and kill the enemy. (Indra)

Glorious and furious with miraculous cure ability, sharp weapon is held in his hands. (Rudra) The deity paves the road to richness and knows the hidden places of treasure like a thief. (Pusan)

The deity is the pacer whose powerful three steps can reach everywhere owned by deities. (Visnu)

The two deities travel together by birds with female companions, similar to travelers. (Asvin) The two deities determine their position, the supreme ruler, in Div and they drink cream.

(Mitra-Varuna)(VIII. 29)

In later poems of *Rigveda*, polytheism gradually comes to unity. “The transformation process develops into two different ways, monotheism and pantheism.”¹⁰ Such pantheistic view refers to “the idea that deities and the universe can be integrated into one deity”.¹¹

The thoughts of pantheism are represented in *Purusa Sukta* (X.90). As MacDonald said, “It’s the origin of Indian pantheism.”¹² In addition, there are *Visvakarman Sukta*, *Prajapati Sukta*, *Nasadiya Sukta* with more pantheism meanings.

1. The deity named Purusa shows up elegantly, with a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, and a thousand feet; he stretches out the earth and the four dimensions; he stands majestically.

2. Only the Purusa equals to everything, belonging to the past and the future; only the Purusa is the lord of death, enjoying the sacrifice and transcending the mundane world.

3. How miraculous his power is; Purusa himself is extraordinarily marvellous; everything in the mundane world occupies one fourth; immortals in Div occupy third fourth.

4. Using the third fourth, the Purusa transcends and the one fourth remains in Antariksa. So the Purusa transcends the ten directions and he walks everywhere of the three divisions of the universe.

5. Since the birth of Visnu, Visnu gives birth to Puruoa. Since the birth of Purusa, his front and back parts are beyond the earth.

11. If the body of the Purusa is dismembered, please consider how many parts are there? What is his mouth? What are his arms? What are his legs? What are his feet?

12. The mouth of the Purusa is Brahman; his arms are Kshatriya; his legs generate Veda; his feet generate Sudra.

13. His chest generates the moon; his eyes rise and become the sun; thunder and fire come out of his mouth; his breath becomes the deity of wind, Vayu.

14. His navel generates Antariksa; his head generates Div; his feet generate Prthivi; he

recreates the four dimensions; the world is constituted in such way.

Purusa Sukta is the later work in *Rigveda* so initial clues of the traditional Indian pantheism can be found in the mythology. Mr. Mi Wenkai points out, “*Purusa Sukta*, starting from the pantheism with one deity, owes the principle of universal creation to a specific Purusa” In other words, from the perspective of theological thoughts, polytheistic worship is unified into the attempt of the supreme deity or pantheistic religions in *Purusa Sukta*. The soul of the Sukta is to regard the Purusa as the noumenon of the universe as well as the supreme deity who creates everything. Purusa creates the world through sacrifice and dismemberment. As understood by Hegel, “Indians regard Brahman as the noumenon of the universe, a kind of invisible object. Only when the noumenon of such invisible object is transformed into inexhaustible and various phenomenons of the world can the expression forms of pantheism emerge.”¹⁴

“In India, from ancient times to nowadays, deities, ruling the universe outlook of pantheism, are understood as a kind of natural force that eternally keeps producing and damaging.”¹⁵ According to *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, “I repeatedly worship the deities in fire and water, deities all over the world, deities in annual harvest and perennial forests”¹⁷, which indicates that Indian pantheism believes that deities are integrated with the nature instead of beyond the nature. From *Rigveda* to *Upanishads*, as for the inherent idea and proposal of pantheistic worship and pantheism: everything in the universe belongs to the same noumenon; various names all regress to the unity. It is called Brahman in Indian term.

IV. Hidden Harmony

As for westerners, the thoughts of Indians are chaotic and weak (without principles). As Taine once pointed out, “The external nature has never encountered such a

weak thought where various changeable presenting images can emerge. No matter how changeable the nature is, the imagination can correspondingly adjust. There are no inherent or fixed deities and their deities can adapt to different circumstance and mutually mix”¹⁷

“There is only one deity with various names. In Veda, all the alternative names of the deity represent his properties. The deity is the creator of the universe. The alternative names of the supreme deity include Shiva, Brahma, Visnu, Indra, Mitra, Veruna, Agni, Yama and so on. The deity has no agents or intercessors. The deity is not in the shape of a human being without companions. The deity is not a father, a mother, a wife, a son or a daughter. However, the deity has mercy on all the children and gifts all the creatures with equal love. Furthermore, the deity has his own name, Om. In *Veda*, the deity is gifted with a number of names.” Max Müller believes that there is no absolute supreme deity in Vedic deities. Whoever human beings pray towards is the supreme deity with all the properties of the supreme deity. In other words, though deities are gifted with different names, some of their properties are mutually connected. Additionally, the status of Vedic deities is also changing constantly, which completely depends on the demands of human beings. It is incorrect to conclude that Vedic poets lack “logic”. Behind the presentation of diversified thoughts, there may be a unified power dominating the operation of the universe. Such power corresponds to “Taoism” in China and “logos” in western world. Veruna who is named as Rta is its ruler. Rta reproduces in an endless succession in a hidden and invisible way. It dominates the patterns of the world and life from the very foundation. Different from Taoism in China, its operation and realization is always administrated by the ultimate will of deity from the very beginning, showing the harmony hidden behind the boundless imagination.

“From the perspective of Vedic poets, any phenomenon in the world is limited to an eternal and omnipresent abstract principle, that is, Rta of the universe. Only by relying on and obeying it can human beings acquire the gifts of nature, the power of life, and the satisfaction of life. Rta in *Rigveda* is a rough conclusion of the nature and thinking connotations.”²⁰

As for Rta, it can be understood from the three perspectives: the universe order, the ritual order and the ethical order.²¹ In *Rigveda*, it can be indicated that, during the acquaintance process of the nature, human beings gradually discover the meanings of the aforementioned three elements towards maintaining the harmony of the whole universe, nature and society. In other words, obedience to Rta is not only the best status of universe harmony but is also the best status of social ethical harmony and ritual harmony.

In traditional Indian views, human beings and other things in the nature are the whole body with mutual influence. In social practical activities, ancestors in *Rigveda* gradually realized the connection between natural things and human beings' social life in various aspects. Thus, with urgent curiosity and fear, when human beings knocked on the door of the nature and entered, they not only expressed deep reverence to illusory deities who were sitting inside solemnly but also praised for natural spectacles under the sky. Meanwhile, they hoped to become the intimate family members and friends of the nature. Examples that human beings regarded the nature as their father, mother and friends can be found in a number of Suktas in *Rigveda*. When they were praising and admiring, they also hoped to gain the love of the nature, through which we can strongly feel the intimate relationship between Indian ancestors and the nature. Such relationship always offers human beings with joy. “We pray for happiness from mountains, rivers and the sun” (VIII; 31, 10)

“The initial deity, Agni, enriches our fields” (VIII; 31, 14). Ancestors in *Rigveda* are “in unity with the nature” (VIII; 58, 2-3).

It can be revealed from relationship between deities, Indian ancestors longed for a harmonious life state. “‘The family of deities’ is anthropomorphized as the social groups of human beings”²¹. Such deities who are praised as Kshatriya often fight against evils wearing gold accessories and sitting in the carriage, similar to Aryans fighting against native Dravidians. Some deities are male while some are female. Indra, the deity of thunder, represents male while Usas, the deity of dawn, represents beautiful female in noble clothes. In addition, some deities represent parents, such as Dyava-Prthivi, while some deities represent children. As family members, they support each other, for instance, Veruna illuminated the world and showed the way for the sun deity, Surya (RV, I, 24, 8) and Surya also informed Mitra and Veruna of guilty people so that they could punish them. (RV, VII, 62, 2) Agni’s tongue helped Indra to drink Soma wine (RV, III, 35, 9-10) so Indra helped all the deities, including Agni, to beat the evil Vritra for freedom (RV, III, 34, 7). Therefore, the thinking invention of Vedic ancestors directs towards spiritual, moral and ethical harmony with order.

If mythological thought is measured by scientific epistemology, it is definitely a chaotic and ridiculous subjective fantasy lacking rational logic, equivalent to the original and lower thinking forms of human beings in childhood. On the contrary, exactly because it is not under the guidance and restricts of rational logic, it is unfettered, innocent, free and unrestrained. In India, the mysterious eastern country, through “anthropomorphization of thoughts of deities” at the cultural origin, spectacular and splendid mythologies and epics that record the life trace of ancestors, reflect the vicissitude history of the nation and precipitate the mark of the progress of human civilization were created. Based on their

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magnificent and odd imagination, an abundant treasure house of mythologies is built.

Moreover, a nation that is still full of divinity is achieved.

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